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SUBJECT: MOROCCANS UNEASY THREE WEEKS AFTER BOMBING

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Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4
(b), (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Three weeks after an Islamic extremist accidentally blew himself up outside an internet caf in the city's notorious slum, Sidi Moumen, the streets of Casablanca remain tense. Since the evening of March 11, when a 23-year-old unemployed Moroccan detonated a belt of explosives he was wearing outside an internet caf, Casablanca has been a city on edge despite the many prior public warnings and high alert status in advance of March 11. The response of local Moroccans in the immediate aftermath was, understandably, fear. However, fear was quickly replaced by anger directed at not only the bomber, but at the police, the Moroccan government, and even in hushed tones, the King himself. Corruption is the main culprit according to many conversations on the streets of Casablanca and some blame the King and the system of royal amnesty that allowed the bomber to walk free two years earlier. Despite the government's insistence that security authorities have the situation in hand, many Casablangans continue to be angry, fearful, and concerned about what the future holds. End Summary.

Suspicious

12. (SBU) For some time before the March 11 bombing, Casablangans appeared to be preparing themselves for the "inevitable." In conversations during the weeks prior to the bombing, talk often drifted to concerns about the probability of another terrorist attack. Some Casablangans feared that a new attack would mark the anniversary of the Madrid train bombings, March 11, 2004. Over a period of weeks, contacts speculated that the birth announcement of the King's second child could trigger an attack, much as the announcement of the birth of his first child was perceived to have done in 2003. On that occasion, the announcement was followed shortly after by the attacks of May 16, when 45 people were killed in six explosions around Casablanca. These predictions, added to daily reports (and rumors) of foiled attacks and arrests of Islamic extremists throughout the region, had many in Casablanca fearing that another attack was to be expected.

Fear and Rumors

13. (SBU) In the period that followed the Sunday night explosion

outside a small internet caf, many Moroccans compared notes about the days running up to the incident. Rumors spread quickly, as they often do in the city, about how friends had heard that it was best to stay home the weekend of March 10. Some friends and contacts claimed they were told to stay away from certain restaurants and hotels in the Casablanca and one longtime Consulate FSN confessed to have heard acquaintances say not to go out that weekend at all. Many around the city remarked, in the days that followed the blast, that they had visited restaurants the night of the explosion, later rumored to be on a list of targets, only to find them closed.

14. (SBU) Since March 11, there has been an increased level of security at many restaurants frequented by the international community and upper class Moroccans. Many, formerly with no security at all, now boast uniformed guards at all entrances. Restaurant owners and managers have also informed us that business, especially in the evening, has dropped off significantly since the March 11 explosion. Many in Morocco's privileged class still avoid shopping malls and movie theaters in upscale neighborhoods as well, out of fear of being targeted. These reactions are similar, we are told, to those that occurred after the May 16, 2003 bombings.

Then Came Anger

15. (SBU) As word was released that the suicide bomber had been granted royal amnesty in 2005 after serving two years of a five-year sentence for terrorism, anger was added to fear. Casablangans have told us that the number of amnesties given in recent years, under King Mohammad VI, is far greater than the number given by his father, Hassan II. Just days before the bombing the King granted amnesty to nearly 9000 prisoners to celebrate the birth of his daughter. To the surprise of many, 14 of the 9000 released had been sentenced to death. Some political contacts saw this as an informal royal statement of support for the recent push to abolish the death penalty in Morocco. Others saw it as a mistake. Fuel was added to the fire when Casablangans learned from the media that the bomber had been planning terrorist attacks since November 2006, along with a group of former inmates living in the Sidi Moumen slum he called home.

16. (SBU) Immediately after the incident the people of Sidi Moumen spontaneously protested against terrorism in front of the bombsite. In addition, in the days that followed other demonstrations occurred on the spot, which many speculate may have been encouraged by local government officials. A few days following the bombing, a teacher from a nearby neighborhood told Poloff that her students were furious with the terrorists for once again bringing "shame" to Sidi Moumen but they are equally enraged with the GOM. The teenage students said that the GOM promised to replace the slums with better buildings and new businesses creating more job opportunities. In their experience, however, little seems to have materialized, leaving an angry and disenfranchised youth open to outside extremist influence. Those, on the other hand, who do find new housing often are without jobs and are unable to pay new electric and water bills that were virtually unknown when they lived in the local slums -- leaving them once again in a desperate situation. Jobs that are available in the area are low paying, leaving families like that of the March 11 bomber, Abdelfettah Raydi, to live in a space the size of a large closet. This situation often forces older children to live on the streets where they can easily fall pray to extremists eager to recruit new members to the jihad.

At the Root of it All, Corruption

17. (SBU) According to many, any problem existing in Casablanca can be explained away in one word: corruption. To nearly everyone with whom we spoke, the royal amnesties Morocco witnesses at nearly every large holiday or celebration are simply a way for prison guards and higher-ups to earn extra cash. The system, they claim, is rife with corruption. According to one contact, prison guards are bribed by the inmates' families, friends, or associates to have the prisoners' names put on the list for amnesty, as many suspect occurred in Raydi's case. The guards' wages are low and they are often eager to supplement their income and as one local put it, "why not, everybody in Casablanca wants to drive a Jaguar." The list then works its way

up the chain of command stopping at each level, for the possibility of compensation, until it reaches the King for his signature. Most Moroccans understand that the King does not create the list. Still, they hold him personally responsible when an amnesty-related problem occurs. Raydi's case was not the first time that someone who benefited from amnesty was implicated in terrorism.

Comment

18. (C) Political fallout from the bombing, especially in Casablanca, is surprising in at least one respect. Distrust of the government, anger at the widening economic divide, and concern over an increasing terrorist threat - all have had an important impact on the views of non-elites in Casablanca. With the September parliamentary elections fast approaching, many of the citizens of the fifth largest city on the continent are looking for an alternative, and what we frequently hear as an alternative choice is the Islamic Party of Justice and Development -- a party that is seen by a growing number of Casablanca's non-elites as the only honest one and perhaps the party of hope for the future.

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